Interalia Magazine

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JOSEPH NECHVATAL interviewed by CHRIS DORLAND

Joseph Nechvatal's contemporary art practice engages in the fragile wedding of image production and image resistance. Through his version of an art-of-noise, he brings a subversive reading to the human body through computational viruses, articulating concerns regarding safety, identity and objectivity. He is interviewed by New York–based artist, Chris Dorland.

- Joseph Nechvatal (https://www.interaliamag.org/author/josephnechvatal/)
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CHRIS DORLAND: You've long worked with the idea of the virus, both biological and digital, as an artistic medium. What drew you to that metaphor, and how has it evolved?

JOSEPH NECHVATAL: It began as a personal response to the AIDS epidemic. People close to me were dying. I assumed I had been touched by it. It was a way to face my horrible demons of death and confront them with flamboyant beauty. Later the virus became an a-life AI apparatus, another way to introduce interference and noise into the image connected to creative destruction. The virus attacks started facing fear and grief and became a tool for imaginative transformation.

CD: You were one of the first artists to use digital technology to make paintings. How did that moment come about, and what did it feel like to take that leap?

JN: It was frightening, and I knew I was taking a radical risk. But in 1985 I was introduced to computer-robotics as a painting method and I jumped on it. Computers interested me ideologically, as tools of cliché production, of political manipulation, particularly in the nuclear buildup under Ronald Reagan. I saw computers quickly becoming the dominant ideological mechanism for the military, for the media, and for the manipulation of consciousness. I wanted to take a non-conventional approach, an almost perverse approach, to mixing painting with computers.

CD: You use the term Computer-Robotic Assisted Painting. What does that mean for you?

JN: When you make and show a painting, you list the medium–oil on canvas, acrylic, mixed media– and so on–so I needed a precise descriptor of my then new painting practice as of 1985. My maquettes were digitized and then that file was spray-painted onto canvas via digitally controlled robotic paint

nozzles: a technology originally developed in Japan and later commercialized in the U.S. by Computer Imaging Services. I would scan in a small maquette, often using in part my graphite drawings, then alter and layer them digitally before they were sprayed onto canvas and stretched traditionally on wood stretcher bars. To omit either “computer” or “robotic” would have been misleading, so I used both in the description of my medium.

CD: Were other artists doing this at the time?

JN: The only other artist I knew using this technology then was Alain Jacquet.

CD: Was the technology coming out of aerospace?

JN: No, more from billboard and performance backdrop production. I was influenced by Barbara Kruger to use the means of reproduction as a mode of production. If I wanted to talk about the spectacle of computers and their ideological manipulation, I felt I should also use the formal mechanism of computers in my paintings

Information Noise Saturation Installation. Photos by Joseph Nechvatal 2025 Magenta Plains NYC

CD : Around your recent Magenta Plains exhibition, *Information Noise Saturation* (https://magentaplains.com/exhibitions/joseph-nechvatal), could you tell me a little about yourself, where you're based now, and what your years in New York meant for you?

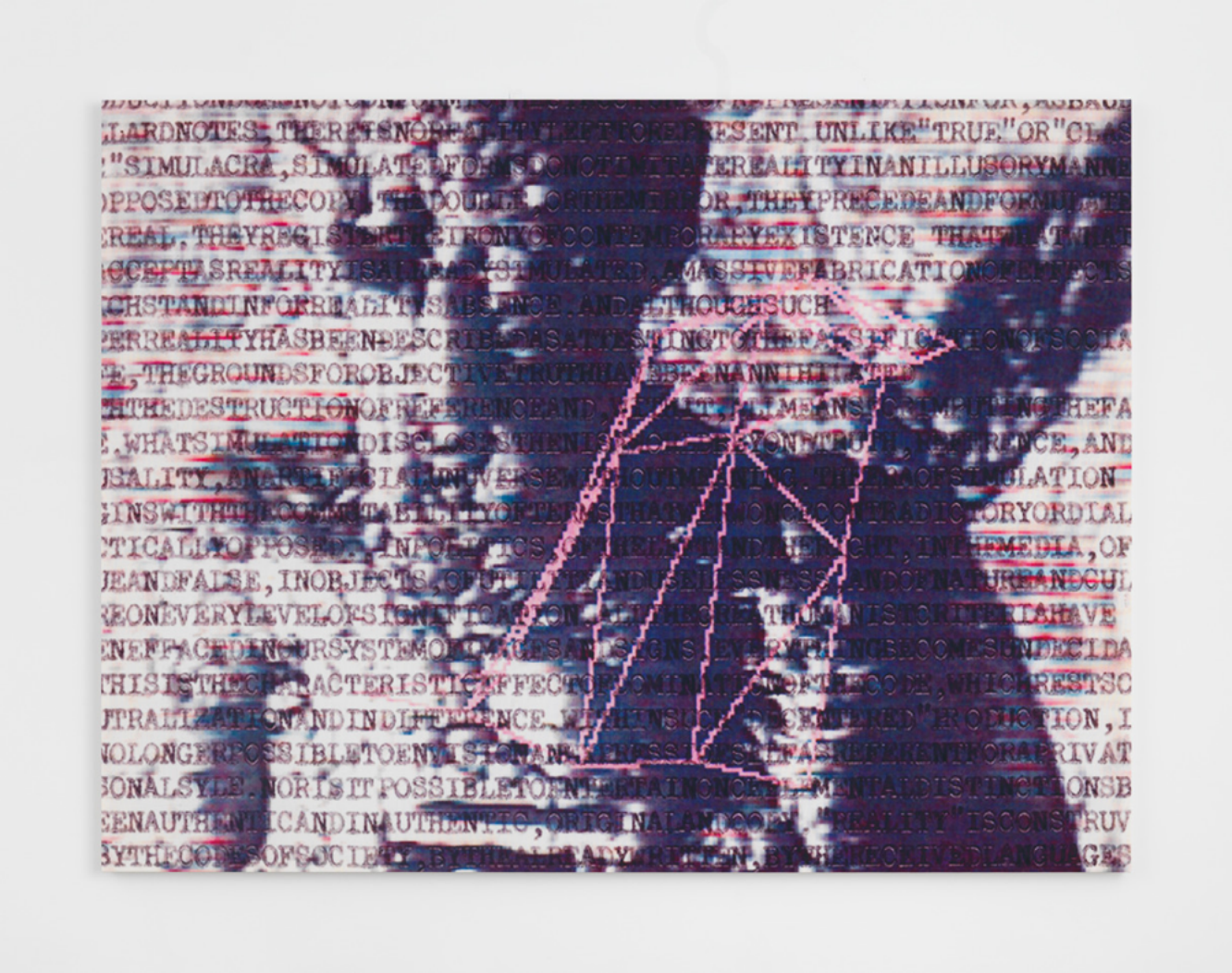
JN: I've been living in Paris full-time for the past twelve years or so. Before that I split my time between Paris and New York, but gentrification pushed me out of New York against my will. That was a drag because New York meant everything to me after I moved there from Chicago to be part of not only the art world, but also the no wave music world, the philosophy world, the literary world, and the poetry world. I first lived in Tribeca in 1975, when it was practically empty, and went to the Mudd Club, CBGBs, Tier 3 and other punk and post-punk music spaces. I still feel like a New Yorker, even if I'm not there all the time anymore.

CD: You've been closely tied to the downtown New York scene of the 1980s. Looking back, what does that period represent for you now?

JN: It was wonderful, complex, and excessive. There was reckless excess in the financial markets and reckless excess in how young artists lived. I moved downtown at 24 and the social scene was extraordinary, not just galleries, but nightclubs, the Poetry Project at St. Mark's, and a genuine camaraderie among artists clustered around collaborative projects. Rents were cheap, the city was a dump, but that abandonment produced freedom: a DIY, non-profit, post-hippie, punk mentality that made space for experimentation. Nobody cared if people liked what art we were doing and that was liberating. There were downsides: drugs, AIDS, financial and political abuse, but it was an incredibly exciting period.

CD: Do you think of yourself as a painter, or has that category become too narrow for what you do?

JN: I consider myself a painter, but with qualifiers. I'd say I am a transdisciplinary painter, because I use drawing, a-life algorithms, and writing in my paintings. One of the paintings in my *Information Noise Saturation* show, *Infinite Apocalyptic Messenger*, has text I typed into its maquette in 1987 before scanning it into a final digital file maquette. The text is a collision between Paul Virilio's *Pure War* text and Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations*, both published by Semiotext(e) in 1983. Philosophy and conceptual art taught me that my motivating concepts are the machines that allow an artwork to find its necessary means of expression, and painting is what I know best. I'm obsessed with its history, but I try to be a nonconformist when it comes to painting and challenge some of its conventions.



Joseph Nechvatal: Infinite Apocalyptic Messenger, 1987 Computer-robotic assisted acrylic painting on canvas 72 x 96 in

CD: How do you position yourself in relation to the Pictures Generation?

JN: Almost in opposition. I used appropriation as a starting point while many of them used it as an endpoint. I wanted pictures to fall into decadence, so I worked perversely with pictures. My goal was something along the lines of a palimpsest. Where one image is superimposed upon another and another and another, so that they almost, but not quite, cancel each other out. That palimpsestic ambiguity fosters subjective visualization–what in magic is called divination, not clarity. My goal is to enhance the powers of subjective being in the viewer. Not to deliver pop or propagandistic readability.

CD: Writing has always been parallel to your art. How does writing inform your practice?

JN: Poetry is fundamental to me. I began reading Rimbaud and Baudelaire in high school, my first experience of pleasurable estrangement. When I arrived in New York, I went to the Poetry Project at St. Mark's and heard poetry read. I began making notes, then writing more and more theory and philosophy, which led to writing poetry, art theory, art criticism, and code. Writing is integral to my intermedia approach. I have written novellas, *~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, even* and *~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator stripped bare, even* and, most recently, *Venus Voluptuous in the Loins of The Last God*. All published by Orbis Tertius Press. Not written using AI, *Venus Voluptuous in the Loins of The Last God* addresses the erotics of art and identity within the context of artificial intelligence.

CD: You've always been politically engaged. How do activism and art speak to each other in your work?

JN: The cancellation of the image itself is political. It is a questioning of visual ideologies. Cancellation destroys the old and opens the mind to the resistance of mainstream narratives. Around 1980, myself and many other artists, were interested in the distributive capacity of art based in reproduction. Most were inspired by a 1968 essay "The Dematerialization of Art" by John Chandler and Lucy R. Lippard, as it argued that Conceptualism had a politically transformative aspect to be delved into. The other inescapable text at the time was The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (or Reproducibility) by Walter Benjamin. I and certain members of my generation realized that this was the best we could do at the time. Sometimes I make explicit political statements in my art, but more often it's a stylistic approach with a general sense of criticality. A criticality of pleasure that I hope stimulates political consciousness.

CD The works in your *Information Noise Saturation* (https://magentaplains.com/exhibitions/joseph-nechvatal) exhibition form a specific selection. Why exhibit these works now?

JN: The three large paintings each mark a different moment. *Profusely Informed Personage*, from 1986, grew out of a work I made that was shown in Documenta 8 called *The Informed Man*. It is about problematizing the communicative processes and was very much influenced by post-structuralism: Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, Lyotard. The central figure comes from a statue of Lazarus. I chose Lazarus because everyone was saying that "painting was dead" and Lazarus returned from the dead. My notion was that computer-robotics could revitalize the field of painting by offering an alternative technique that expanded the definition of what a painting can be. *Infinite Apocalyptic Messenger*, was my first hands-on involvement with a computer in a computer lab and includes the typed text from 1987 I mentioned above. The third, *Without Chains*, was influenced by Caravaggio's painting *Narcissus*. I am using the mirror as a device for meditation on cybernetic circuitry and social mirroring. Now, I'm deeply involved with, and also critical of, artificial intelligence, which I've used since 2000 in artificial-life form. As is beginning to be widely understood, AI presents a new apocalyptic potential that is circulating somewhat subliminally, much like the terror of nuclear war technology was in the 1980s. Society needs to discuss this AI threat collectively and art can help us think it through.

Joseph Nechvatal: Profusely Informed Personage, 1986 Computer-robotic assisted acrylic painting on canvas 72 x 96 in

Joseph Nechvatal: Without Chains, 1990 Computer-robotic assisted acrylic painting on canvas 96 x 72 in

CD: Could you speak briefly about the diptych drawings in this exhibition?

JN: These dark, cerebral, palimpsest-like diptych drawings express my post-minimal, post-punk period where institutionalized forms of cultural image production are confronted by a semi-private vernacular based on obscured excess. You can see them as abstract gray fields, if you don't look into them, or you can spend time discovering what's there. That's the invitation to long looking subjective discovery. This drawing series, made between 1979 and 1989, have the general features of being nihilistic, moody, intimate, difficult, obscure, and network-like; with a palimpsest quality. They invite the viewer to visualize content from the overload of representational imagery presented in uniform conflict, as the figurative elements have been buried in an all-over monolithic minimalistic gray veil. So the drawings, at first glance, may look minimal and abstract, but on deeper viewing they reveal a super-saturated

static field of visual noise rendered as figurative/ground collapse. I had wished to draw from life, so I began to draw images culled from *Life Magazine*, so the drawings mix biblical imagery with playboy blond bimbo imagery with military equipment with macho man cowboys, and so much more: all imagery that supposedly manipulates the populace. So the point of the drawings is bigger than any single recognizable image in them–the point is to offer up a meditation on sublimated nuclear and information overload.

Joseph Nechvatal: Mind of the World, 1984 Graphite on paper Diptych, Overall 11 x 28 in

CD: Your works deal with noise and saturation. What is your relationship to silence and withdrawal?

JN: It's a push-pull. In the early drawings, there's visual excess, but behind a monochrome gray field, a withdrawal, an invisibility. That paradox of withheld abundance is the sweet spot where visualization can occur. It opens the door to an imaginative subjectivity that resists propaganda, logos, and the obvious.

CD When you think about mortality, your own or humanity's, what role does art play in that reflection?

JN: Art–especially static art like painting, sculpture, books–enters the artist into a long chain of being that goes back deep into time. And, if Artificial General Intelligence doesn't kill us all off first, this chain of art will continue far into the future. So being a link in that cultural chain is a form of

immortality. Everyone ages, gets sick, dies. But art continues. It ties us to our ancestors, and to a future tribe who will value those ancestors. That's the gift of *Ars longa; vita brevis*, which means Art is long, life is brief.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Joseph Nechvatal's contemporary art practice engages in the fragile wedding of image production and image resistance. Through his version of an art-of-noise, he brings a subversive reading to the human body through computational viruses, articulating concerns regarding safety, identity and objectivity. In the introduction to the book *Selected Essays 1981-2001* by Peter Halley, Richard Milazzo describes Joseph Nechvatal's theoretic output as a systematic onslaught of critical theory.

Since 1986, Nechvatal has worked with ubiquitous electronic visual information, computers and computer-robotics. His computer-robotic assisted paintings and computer software animations are shown regularly in galleries and museums throughout the world. From 1991-1993 he worked as artist-in-resident at the Louis Pasteur Atelier and the Saline Royale / Ledoux Foundation's computer lab in Arbois, France on *The Computer Virus Project*: an experiment with computer viruses as a creative stratagem. In 2002 he extended that artistic research into the field of viral artificial life through his collaboration with the programmer Stéphane Sikora.

Dr. Nechvatal earned his Ph.D. in the philosophy of art and new technology at The Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts (CAiiA) at the University of Wales, Newport, UK where he served as conference coordinator for the 1st International CAiiA Research Conference Consciousness Reframed: Art and Consciousness in the Post-Biological Era (July 1997); an international conference which looked at new developments in art, science, technology and consciousness. From 1999 to 2014 Nechvatal taught in the mfa graduate department at the School of Visual Arts in New York City (SVA). His book of essays *Towards an Immersive Intelligence: Essays on the Work of Art in the Age of Computer Technology and Virtual Reality* (*1993-2006*) was published by Edgewise Press in 2009. In 2011 his book *Immersion Into Noise* was published by the University of Michigan Library's Scholarly Publishing Office in conjunction with the Open Humanities Press. It was republished in a 2nd edition in 2022. Nechvatal has also published 3 books with Punctum Press: Minóy (ed.) (2014) (historical noise aesthetics), Destroyer of Naivetés (2015) (poetry) and Styling Sagaciousness (2022) (poetry). In 2023 his 1995 cybersex farce novella *~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, even* was published by Orbis Tertius Press and in 2025 they published its sequel *Venus Voluptuous in the Loins of The Last God* (https://www.lulu.com/shop/joseph-nechvatal/venus-voluptuous-in-the-loins-of-the-last-god/paperback/product-w4q4zkd.html).

Chris Dorland is a New York–based artist whose paintings, videos, and installations explore the intersections of technology, infrastructure, and image collapse. Working between analog and digital processes, he transforms the visual language of data systems and surveillance architectures into dense, fractured compositions. His monograph Future Ruins (Hirmer Publishers, 2026) accompanies a solo museum exhibition, Chrome Shelter, at the Museum gegenstandsfreier Kunst in Germany. He is a co-founder of Magenta Plains.

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About Joseph Nechvatal

Since 1986 Joseph Nechvatal has worked with ubiquitous electronic visual information, computers and computer-robotics. His computer-robotic assisted paintings and computer software animations are shown regularly in galleries and museums throughout the world. From 1991-1993 he worked as artist-in-resident at the Louis Pasteur Atelier and the Saline Royale / Ledoux Foundation's computer lab in Arbois, France on The Computer Virus Project: an experiment with computer viruses as a creative stratagem. In 2002 he extended that artistic research into the field of viral artificial life through his collaboration with the programmer Stéphane Sikora. Dr. Nechvatal earned his Ph.D. in the philosophy of art and new technology at The Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts (CAiiA) University of Wales College, Newport, UK where he served as conference coordinator for the 1st International CAiiA Research Conference entitled Consciousness Reframed: Art and Consciousness in the Post-Biological Era (July 1997); an international conference which looked at new developments in art, science, technology and consciousness. From 1999 to 2013, Nechvatal taught at the School of Visual Arts in New York City (SVA). His book of essays Towards an Immersive Intelligence: Essays on the Work of Art in the Age of Computer Technology and Virtual Reality (1993-2006) was published by Edgewise Press in 2009. In 2011 his book Immersion Into Noise was published by the University of Michigan Library's Scholarly Publishing Office in conjunction with the Open Humanities Press. His Punctum Press book/cd project (ed.) Minóy is available here:http://punctumbooks.com/titles/minoy/ His archive is housed at The Fales Library (Downtown Special Collection) at N.Y.U. in New York City. Collected essays from Hyperallergic are at: http://hyperallergic.com/author/joseph_nechvatal/ http://www.nechvatal.net View all posts with Joseph Nechvatal → (https://www.interaliamag.org/author/josephnechvatal/)

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